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How to cite:

Kirkwood, Adrian (2013). English for communication in Bangladesh: baseline research to establish the pre-existing environment for the 'English in Action' project. *System*, 41(3) pp. 866–879.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

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Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1016/j.system.2013.09.002>

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English for communication in Bangladesh: baseline research to establish the pre-existing environment for the 'English in Action' project

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Abstract

Although Bangladesh is largely monolingual, English is increasingly important for international communication. The English in Action project was established to enhance the use of English as a tool for better access to the world economy.

Interventions in three sectors (primary education, secondary education and adult learning) aim to improve the teaching and learning of communicative English over a 9-year period. At the outset of the project a range of baseline studies was undertaken to collect relevant data to develop a detailed representation of the communicative environment for English in Bangladesh. The main focus of this article is formal education contexts. Data collection for these studies involved various methods including interviews, surveys, classroom observations and desk research of existing sources. This article describes the nature of those studies and presents some of the key findings. Together, the studies create a rich picture of the circumstances that bring about a generally low level of competence in communicative English, despite individuals experiencing many years of compulsory study of the subject within formal education.

Keywords: Baseline research; Formal education; Second language learning; Information & communication technologies; Qualitative change; Teacher development.

1. Introduction

Bangladesh is predominantly monolingual, with Bangla (Bengali) being spoken by about 98% of the population (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2010). English, as the unofficial second language, is used mainly by a minority elite (largely educated in private English-medium schools and universities) or more widely for external/international communication (Tripathi, 1998). It constitutes a compulsory subject taught in Bangladeshi schools at both primary (up to school Class 5) and secondary levels (from Classes 6 to 10). Nonetheless, while the national *English for Today* curriculum has in recent years stressed communicative use of the language, this appears not to have been effectively implemented. Widespread concerns have been expressed about the ability of students to communicate in English (see, for example, Chowdhury & Ha, 2008; Hamid & Baldauf, 2008; Hamid, Sussex & Khan, 2009; Hasan, 2004).

The last two decades have seen a substantial increase in participation rates in both primary and secondary schools (BANBEIS, 2010). More recently, a series of initiatives have sought to improve the *quality* of teaching and learning through both curriculum and pedagogic reforms. Nonetheless, many obstacles to improved quality remain. For example, a report on primary education by UNICEF (2009a) drew attention to challenges presented by poor qualifications and lack of teacher motivation, large average class size, low contact hours for students, high rates of absenteeism and a focus on memorising facts during lessons. In the secondary sector (non-compulsory), the Education Watch 2005 report (Ahmed, Nath, Hossain & Kalam, 2006) highlighted deficiencies in teachers' skills and capability, inadequate facilities and learning

materials and low expenditure per student. To compensate, many families expended a considerable amount on private tutoring (Hamid, Sussex & Khan, 2009).

In terms of teaching and learning communicative English, various factors have been suggested as contributing to the current situation, but limited empirical evidence has been available. The term *Communicative English* is used to signify the linguistic skills necessary for effective interaction with other people, primarily though oral and aural means (i.e. speaking and listening). Hasan and Akhand (2009) propose that the proper implementation of the *English for Today* curriculum is hindered because few teachers have been trained to use the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach. Almost all teachers (and most teacher trainers) learned English by means of the Grammar-Translation Method that places more emphasis upon reading and writing than on speaking and listening, but they are now expected to teach English using the CLT approach. Another factor is that no formal testing of oral or aural skills in English exists within the Bangladeshi school system; examinations concentrate on reading, writing and grammar.

2. English in Action, Bangladesh

This article concerns the series of baseline research studies that were undertaken soon after the English in Action (EIA) project was launched. It outlines the rationale for those studies and provides a brief account of key findings. Those studies will make an important contribution to determining the ultimate success of the project. The article's emphasis is upon what happens to support learning in formal education and, in particular, within the context of schools.

EIA aims to develop communicative English language learning and teaching in Bangladesh. Funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development (DfID) for a 9-year period from May 2008, the goal of the EIA Project is to "contribute to the economic growth of Bangladesh by providing English language as a tool for better access to the world economy" (EIA, 2008 p. 5). Project interventions will increase significantly the number of people able to communicate effectively in English. Initiatives in three sectors – primary schools, secondary schools and adult learning – will exploit information and communication technologies (ICT) in order to

- increase motivation for learning
- improve access to communicative English resources, and
- enhance and extend the necessary learning and teaching practices.

The substantial growth in student enrolments at both primary and secondary levels since 1990 (BANBEIS, 2010) has necessitated an increase in the number of teachers employed in schools run by the Government of Bangladesh and by non-governmental organisations (NGOs). EIA's school-based interventions aim to enhance and support the professional development of teachers so that they are better able to implement the communicative aspects of English language teaching and learning. ICT will provide additional resources to support learning and to develop the English language environment.

However, EIA is not simply an ICT project, adopting a 'deficit' model and providing a 'technology fix'. Essentially, the project will develop the capacity of large numbers of people to learn and/or teach communicative English and ultimately to use that

language effectively. Table 1 indicates some of the main beneficiaries that EIA aims to impact upon over the life of the project.

Table 1. The main beneficiaries of the English in Action Project, Bangladesh

TABLE 1 about here

Assessing the impact of capacity building activities can be difficult when they include a diverse range of aspects, some of which are intangible, fluid and iterative processes (Hailey, James & Wrigley, 2005). More is required than simply measuring quantitative change over time. Impact assessment must include processes by which essential qualitative aspects can also be evidenced. In order to explore the dynamic interplay between the various components of a multifaceted set of circumstances, a system-wide perspective is necessary. Capacity building and impact can be seen as “emergent outcomes that come from the complex interrelationships amongst internal components and between the internal activities of a system and its external context” (Hailey *et al*, 2005, p. 19).

3. Research, monitoring and evaluation activities

To assess the extent to which the EIA Project achieves its ‘purpose’ and ‘goal’ a programme of research, monitoring and evaluation (RME) activities has been designed (see Kirkwood & Rae, 2011 for more detail). The RME activities focus not only upon outputs emanating from the three core sectors (primary, secondary and adult), but also pay attention to issues that are significant across the project as a whole. Change over time needs to be assessed, so it is essential to have a detailed understanding of the situation that existed immediately before the introduction of

any interventions. To that end, a set of project-wide baseline studies was planned and carried out within the first year of EIA to provide “an analysis describing the situation prior to a development intervention, against which progress can be assessed or comparisons made” (OECD-DAC, 2002).

This article outlines those studies and presents a brief account of some of the main findings. A number of functions were served by the initial baseline studies. First, they demonstrated the situation at the project’s outset relating to the teaching and learning of English ‘on the ground’ and the contexts for communicative use of English. Second, the studies informed the intervention outputs and activities planned for each sector and the project as a whole. Third, the studies provide a reliable basis for comparison by presenting an appropriate range of base measures against which project outputs and activities can subsequently be evaluated to determine what improvements have occurred.

3.1 Why these baseline studies?

Since the purpose of EIA is to “increase significantly the number of people able to communicate in English” (EIA, 2008 p. 5), it was obvious that there was a need to determine the extent of spoken English competence *before* the interventions began (Baseline Study 1). The baseline studies also needed to capture key elements of the context within which English is learned and used, documenting influences that impact, positively and negatively, on the goal and purpose of the project.

Accordingly, at the outset of the EIA project it was necessary to ascertain the situation relating to other contributory factors that could be of considerable

influence, considered collectively to comprise ‘the communicative environment’.

Baseline studies were undertaken to achieve the following:

1. Benchmark spoken English ability (as mentioned above)
2. Appraise motivations and aspirations
3. Determine current classroom practices
4. Review the extent and nature of existing teaching materials
5. Determine opportunities for training and development
6. Understand key components of the technology environment

If learners and their teachers are highly motivated and have realistic aspirations, it is more likely that communicative English will develop effectively. Earlier sources have indicated that there is a widespread desire among children and adults to be better able to communicate in English (Bhanot, 2007; Tripathi, 1998). EIA is not concerned with developing communicative English as an end in itself, but as a tool for economic and social purposes. In the national context, motivation was expected to be “instrumental” rather than “integrative” (Gardner and Lambert, 1972). Study 2 examines not only the motivations and experiences of learners and teachers, but also the demand for communicative English in the workplace and in post-school education.

Although the English curriculum taught in all Government schools (and many others) stresses communicative use of the language, this does not appear to be effectively implemented (see Hasan & Akhand, 2009; Imam, 2005). It is widely acknowledged that only a minority of the population are reasonably competent in communicative

English and many adults have been critical of the teaching they received. An examination of current classroom practices in English lessons was necessary (Study 3), because some EIA interventions aim to enhance and supplement pedagogical practices for communicative English in the primary and secondary sectors.

Various supporting factors can contribute to the effective teaching and learning of communicative English. The availability of suitable materials and resources is important. A series of *English for Today* textbooks provides the basis of the curriculum at primary and secondary levels, but other resources (both in and out of schools) can contribute to learning (Study 4). Another key factor relates to the training and development of teachers in the use of appropriate pedagogic practices (Study 5).

EIA interventions in the primary, secondary and adult sectors all plan to utilise media technologies to achieve their aims, so identifying the nature of the existing technology landscape in Bangladesh was necessary (Study 6). The availability and reach of broadcasting, telecommunications and computing facilities needed investigation. In parallel, it was necessary to determine people's levels of access to technologies and their familiarity with its use. It is inevitable that technology access and use will change significantly over the life of the project and there is considerable potential for impact to be made by influences external to the EIA interventions (e.g. popular music and films in English) (Rahman, 2005).

During the pilot phase, 2008-2011, EIA sought to build the capacity for communicative English language learning by means that are both *scalable* during the lifespan of the project and *sustainable* in the longer term. The Baseline Studies

supply appropriate qualitative and quantitative measures against which to document the extent of changes in the communicative English environment over time and the extent to which EIA project interventions have contributed to achieving effective communicative English language acquisition in Bangladesh.

4. The baseline studies

Each of the six Baseline Studies concentrated upon separate, but related fields in relation to developing the use of communicative English within Bangladesh. Details of the studies undertaken and some of the key findings are presented below. [N.B. Administratively, Bangladesh comprises seven Divisions, each of which is made up of several Districts that are further sub-divided into Upazilas (counties). Because the pilot phase of EIA (2008-2011) was limited to a selected range of Upazilas in various Divisions of Bangladesh, the geographical scope for the Baseline Studies that involved data collection was similarly constrained. As a result, the findings cannot necessarily be considered representative of Bangladesh in its entirety.]

4.1 Baseline Study 1: Assessment of the spoken English competence among school students, teachers and adults in the community

Previous studies have indicated that students' ability to speak and converse in English is less well developed than their skills in reading and writing. The first Baseline Study (English in Action, 2009a) created a benchmark for competence in spoken English. As there is no assessment of oral or aural English skills within the Bangladeshi school system, this core baseline activity has provided the first reliable measure of spoken English to be established in Bangladesh on such a scale. It

examined spoken English competence in selected Government and NGO primary and secondary schools in a wide range of locations (urban, semi-urban and rural) and among adults in the local communities. There were two phases of data collection: non-government schools in October/November 2008 and government schools in March 2009.

Experienced assessors for Trinity College, London conducted brief individual interviews with 3,820 school students, 454 teachers and 265 adults. For each phase of fieldwork the assessors met both before and the during data collection to standardise their procedures and criteria as appropriate for the Bangladesh context. Each interviewee's spoken English was evaluated against the criteria of the 12-point Trinity College English Language scale (for details of the grades and the language items for each, see Trinity College, 2007). Table 2 summarises details of the groups of interviewees, including the mean Trinity grade for each.

Table 2. Composition of the 4 groups of interviewees and the Trinity grades achieved

TABLE 2 about Here

Figure 1 shows the overall distribution of Trinity grades achieved by the four different groups of interviewees (i.e. primary and secondary school students, teachers and community adults). The 12 Trinity grades are combined into four groups: *Initial* (Grades 1-3), *Elementary* (Grades 4-6), *Intermediate* (Grades 7-9) and *Advanced* (Grades 10-12). In addition, there were a large proportion of interviewees who had virtually no proficiency in spoken English (i.e. they were considered to be at Grade 0).

Figure 1. Spoken English proficiency - The overall distribution of Trinity grades achieved by the 4 groups of interviewees.

FIGURE 1 About Here

About three-quarters of the community adults were assessed as being below the starting Trinity grade (45.3% overall, comprising 41% of males and 50% of females) or within the *Initial* group (39.2% overall). Only 6 male adults (of 164 interviewed) were found to be above Trinity grade 6 and only 1 female adult (of 101) achieved a Trinity grade above 4.

More than one-third of the 1,611 primary school students interviewed were found to be below the starting grade (35.3%), while more than half were within the *Initial* group (57.4%). Even though they had been studying English for at least 3 years, a large majority of the 2,209 secondary school students interviewed (84.8%) were found to be within the *Initial* Trinity grades, with a further 10.6% at the *Elementary* level.

Overall, half of all the teachers were within the *Initial* group of Trinity grades, with one third (34.4%) being within the *Elementary* grades and a further 9.5% assessed as being in the *Intermediate* grades. Figure 2 shows the distribution of teachers across the full range of Trinity grades, with those identified as ‘teachers of English’ being separated out from all other teachers. Three-fifths of the teachers of English (60.6%) were assessed to be at Trinity grade 4 or below, while almost the same proportion of the other teachers (61.2%) were at Trinity grade 3 or below. A small proportion of teachers demonstrated competence above the *Elementary* level (that is, grade 7 or

above). However, 2.9% of English teachers and 6.9% of the other teachers were assessed as having no spoken English.

Figure 2. The distribution of teachers across the full range of Trinity grades

FIGURE 2 about Here

In summary: More than 4,500 brief interviews provided data that indicate a low level of communicative skills overall. Among students there appears to be no clear progression resulting from the years spent studying English in school. At primary level (classes 1-5), mean Trinity grades ranged from 1.25 to 1.51, while at secondary level (classes 6-10) the range was from 1.76 to 2.72. One of the contributory factors appears to be fact that many of those who teach English lack the skills in oral English to provide a good model for the school classes they teach (the mean Trinity grade for *all* teachers was 3.52).

4.2 Baseline Study 2: Socio-linguistic factors

This study has two parts. The first, Study 2a (English in Action, 2009b) involved a survey administered by a team of fieldworkers who undertook interviews (in Bangla) with 2,174 school students, 453 teachers and 250 adults in the community (2,877 individuals in total). The survey looked into the motivation for learning English and the interviewees' experiences of using communicative English (the questionnaire appears as an Appendix in English in Action, 2009b). The survey involved 2 phases of fieldwork: first in October/November 2008 and subsequently in March 2009, in the same locations as Studies 1 and 6b.

While some studies into the role of motivation in second language learning have examined characteristics of the learners themselves (e.g. Gardner and Lambert, 1972; Dörnyei, 1994), others have drawn attention to contextual factors (individual, social, and societal) that affect students' learning (Walqui, 2000). The EIA project was particularly interested in learning about the social and contextual factors that pertained in Bangladesh.

Motivation for learning English was very high. Almost all school students (99.4 %) and teachers (98.2%) and 75.0% of community adults indicated that they were motivated to learn English (using a 3-point scale – 'motivated'/'not motivated'/'neither'). Many respondents felt that English is important in Bangladesh (either 'very important' or 'quite important' on a 5-point scale): 75.2% of school students, 90.4% of teachers and 80.7% of community adults. Students were asked about their need for English skills after leaving school (using a 3-point scale – 'very important'/'not very important'/'don't know'). 89.4% of students considered it 'very important' to be able to read and write in English when employed after leaving school, while 86.6% felt that speaking and listening in English would be 'very important' in their future work. In terms of education at college or university, 90.0% of school students considered that it would be 'very important' to be able to read and write in English, while 89.0% felt that speaking and listening in English would be 'very important' (on a 3-point scale).

However, despite the high levels of enthusiasm, respondents reported few opportunities for people to use communicative English in their daily lives. Students were asked, "Apart from school lessons and homework, how often do you use

English” in a range of communicative situations. Responses were on a 5-point scale, from ‘Not at all’ to ‘Very often’. A similar question was asked of teachers and adults about their use of English “apart from formal training or instruction”. To illustrate how infrequently English is used for communication, Table 3 shows the proportion of each group that responded ‘Not at all’ or ‘Very little’.

Table 3. Extent of use of English reported for a range of communicative activities

TABLE 3 About Here

For most of the communicative activities listed, more than three-quarters of those surveyed reported using little or no English. The activities for which English was *most frequently* used by all groups (i.e. low percentages within each group in Table 3) were ‘reading posters and billboards’ and ‘reading instructions or labels’. As a group, teachers were more likely than other adults and students to use English for communication with relatives or friends: in particular, they more often helped relatives to complete forms. For school students there appeared to be very limited engagement with English outside of lessons in the subject (all other subjects are taught in Bangla). At the time of the survey, access to computers and the Internet was extremely limited beyond the metropolitan areas (see Baseline Study 6 below), so very few respondents had worked in English when ‘using the Internet’ or ‘writing e-mails’.

Interviewees were asked to indicate which of the four language skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking – they felt was their *strongest* in English, and which was their *weakest*. Table 4 shows the responses. Among all respondent groups

reading was most frequently reported to be the strongest skill, while speaking was most frequently reported to be the weakest skill.

Table 4. Self-rating of strongest and weakest skills in English

TABLE 4 About Here

The English skills that students reported needing most to succeed in examinations were writing (70.8%) and reading (27.8%). When asked which skill they felt would be necessary in their future life, about two-thirds of students chose speaking (65.1%) and a quarter chose reading (25.9%).

The second part of this study, Study 2b (English in Action, 2009c), involved 200 interviews with managers in companies, organisations and post-school educational institutions in and around Dhaka to assess the nature of the demand for competence in communicative English. The EIA project team determined the sample size and listed categories of businesses and organisations most likely to have contact with international customers or clients. These included garment manufacturers, export agencies, banks, information technology and communications companies and the travel and hospitality industry. Non-governmental organisations and universities/colleges were additional categories. The contracted research agency selected the detailed list of organisations (agreed with EIA) and arranged the interviews with appropriate managers. Those interviewed represented various enterprises (for example, each interviewee was asked to indicate, from the point of view of their organisation, which particular skills in English they would like school-leavers to possess). The responses are shown in Table 5 by category of organisation.

Table 5. Skills in English considered necessary in organisations

TABLE 5 About Here

When recruiting people for jobs that require English language skills, only half of those interviewed (49.5%) felt that they were able to attract sufficient applicants with the necessary communicative skills.

In summary: Although most of those surveyed (in Study 2a) felt motivated to learn English and many acknowledged the importance of the language for communication, respondents reported little exposure to English in most communicative situations. Apart from in formal lessons, most students and many teachers reported limited opportunities to practice their skills, particularly speaking in English. Students recognised that the English language skills necessary for exam success were not the same as those they would need after completing school. In terms of many employment sectors and post-school education (Study 2b), there was clearly a demand for communicative English skills among school-leavers, particularly speaking. However, many organisations had difficulty attracting applicants with the necessary communicative skills.

4.3 Baseline Study 3: An observation study of English lessons in primary and secondary schools

For this study (English in Action, 2009d) observations of whole lessons were undertaken to establish an understanding of the existing methods and practices by which English language is taught in schools. When a project aims to change teaching and learning behaviours, it is important to comprehend the pre-existing classroom

practices (see, for example, Chesterfield, Rubio & Vásquez, 1999; Singh, Gwung & Koirala, 2010). This baseline study looked at English teaching in a range of Government and NGO primary and secondary schools located in selected areas of Dhaka, Sylhet and in Upazilas in the central part of Bangladesh. A total of 252 observations were completed in more than 100 schools in February 2009. Information was also collected about the classroom environment and the professional background and experience of the teacher being observed. A time sampling technique was used to record what type of activity (from pre-specified lists) the teacher and students were doing at selected points throughout the lesson (generally of 40-45 minutes duration). These were at the beginning and end and also at the 10th, 15th, 20th, 25th and 30th minutes (see English in Action, 2009d for details). The EIA project's team of Teaching Development Co-ordinators undertook the observations following training in the use of the technique and participation in standardisation sessions.

The pedagogic practices observed in most lessons did not encourage a communicative approach to learning English. At each of the observation points throughout the lessons, teaching from the front of the class was the predominant pedagogic activity. Teachers also tended to read aloud from the textbook and, subsequently, asked closed questions or moved around the classroom monitoring and facilitating students as they worked individually. No other single pedagogic activity was observed in more than 10% of classes at each of the times sampled. The use of teaching aids (other than the textbook) was infrequently observed. There were limited occasions when individual students or groups were encouraged to

speak in English, except to answer closed questions (maximum 13% of observations at any time point), to chorus responses (max. = 11%) or taking turns to read aloud from the textbook (max. = 9%). Students sometimes worked interactively in groups (max. = 8%) or in pairs (max. = 7%).

Upon reviewing each lesson in its entirety, observers noted that most teachers interacted positively with their students and maintained good discipline. However, only a minority of teachers adopted a stimulating and task-based approach to their lessons. A majority (58%) of teachers did NOT ask any thoughtful questions to stimulate students' interest and 48% did NOT set any challenging tasks for the students to make them think. In almost two-thirds of classes, less than half of the students had opportunities to participate actively in discussion or to answer questions: 'none or hardly any' in 14% of classes, 'some (less than 50%)' in 47%. Only a small proportion of students had an opportunity to speak in English during the lesson. In 68% of the classes observed 'none or hardly any' spoke in English, while in 23% of classes only 'some' (less than 50%) did so.

In summary: At both primary and secondary levels, lessons in English tend to be conducted in a didactic teacher-centred manner, with limited opportunities for students to practice and develop their speaking skills. There was little evidence of the communicative approach to teaching advanced in the *English for Today* curriculum and textbooks being effectively carried through to actual classroom practices.

4.4 Baseline Study 4: An audit of current materials for teaching English

An audit of existing materials and resources that were available in Bangladesh to support English language teaching and learning was conducted for this study by an experienced consultant (English in Action, 2009e). The consultant gathered information using both primary and secondary sources. Visits to institutions, discussions, interviews and a workshop were supported by documentation from government, NGO and private sources. Existing research reports, project documentation, teacher training materials and journal articles were also examined. A questionnaire was used to obtain information about the materials available for teaching English in the main organisations involved. A synthesis of the consultant's findings is presented here.

The review found that the print materials available in primary and secondary schools are limited, even in elite English-medium schools. The emphasis in most workbooks and textbooks is on grammatical structures and they include exercises and vocabulary that is often outmoded. Some NGOs have produced textbooks for the primary sector that were deemed to be of better quality and more child- and context-focused. While the NGO books were considered to be more appealing than the Government textbooks (superior paper and print quality and better use of illustrations), they cost considerably more. The Government's series of *English for Today* textbooks are widely used at primary and secondary levels. Each of these is written by a committee of writers, often drawn from the secondary or tertiary

sectors. The educational quality, content and methodology are variable across the series.

In Bangladesh the environment of English is limited, with few out-of-school resources to support use of the language. Even in the capital, Dhaka, the majority of signs are in Bangla, sometimes with English as well. There are a limited number of English language newspapers and access to television programmes in English is poor and mainly restricted to metropolitan areas. Many sources indicate that few people speak in English even if their English is good. In villages and rural environments there are few print or literary artefacts in either Bangla or English.

4.5 Baseline Study 5: An audit of a range of English language teacher training and adult provision

Taking the form of an audit and review, this study (English in Action, 2009f) involved examining the existing training arrangements for teaching English in schools and colleges. It also considered the vocationally oriented provision for adults, such as learning within companies and in private ‘coaching schools’ for migrant workers. Information was gathered using a questionnaire for representatives of Government departments or agencies and other organisations considered to be major providers of English language teaching and training. Interviews were also conducted with a range of training providers.

At the primary level, there has been no separate initiative for English language teacher training from the Government of Bangladesh to date. With more than 82,000 primary schools in Bangladesh (BANBEIS, 2010), the challenges are considerable since English is just one of the curriculum areas every primary teacher

is expected to teach. Funded by multiple international donors, one major sector-wide programme (PEDP-II) aimed to improve the quality of primary education through teacher professional development activities (UNICEF, 2009b). There have been a number of initiatives and projects aimed at improving the pedagogical practices of teachers at secondary level, where there is more subject specialisation among teaching staff. These include the Secondary Education Sector Improvement Project (SESIP), Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Project (TQI-SEP), ELTIP (English Language Teaching Improvement Project) and other NGO and donor-led projects.

One concern expressed consistently by respondents to the survey is the poor level of communicative English among those providing instruction (teachers and teacher educators). Even those who are academically well qualified are often not sufficiently confident and skilled to model fluent spoken English (English in Action, 2009f, section 5.1).

There are many private universities, institutes and coaching centres that provide English language training for many sectors of the population, including those individuals studying English for formal qualifications, professional development, specific career progressions and workplace requirements. Various business sectors (e.g. the garment industry, banking, hospitality) provide some English language training that is focused on the specific needs of the particular sector.

4.6 Baseline Study 6: The technology environment

This study also comprises two parts. Study 6a (English in Action, 2009g) involved desk research of available sources to provide a review of the media and technology

infrastructure and provision at the project's outset. Bangladesh is classified as one of the 'Least Developed Countries' by the United Nations and there are considerable differences between metropolitan/urban locations and rural areas in terms of the technology environment. The generated supply of electricity fails to meet the demand and 'load shedding' (cuts in the power supply) occurs on a daily basis. In rural areas many households have no access to electricity and services such as television and landline telephones are available to a much lesser extent than in cities and main towns.

Only 0.75% of the population had a landline telephone connection in 2007, although growth in the network coverage for mobile phones has been very substantial in recent years. There were over 34 million mobile subscribers in 2007 and through sharing, many more people are able to access a mobile phone. Given the limited landline infrastructure and a very low rate of computer ownership (see English in Action, 2009g, Table 3.7) access to the Internet through landlines is extremely restricted (see Figure 3). There is a significant digital divide between those residing in metropolitan/urban locations and the very extensive rural population (see English in Action, 2009g, Table 3.8).

Figure 3. Comparison of mobile phone subscribers and Internet users, 2000-2007

FIGURE 3 About Here

Study 6b (English in Action, 2009h) took the form of a survey administered by a team of fieldworkers who undertook interviews in Bangla with 2,159 school students, 457 teachers and 266 adults in the community (2,882 individuals in total). This study

sought to assess the levels of access to technologies and the familiarity with their use among people within Bangladesh. The survey involved 2 phases of fieldwork: in October/November 2008 and in March 2009, in the same locations as Studies 1 and 2a.

Almost all teachers (99.1%) and a large proportion of the community adults (86.7%) in the survey either owned or had access to a mobile phone. More than half of the students (54.8%) reported having such access. More than 80% of each group were able to access a television service, but fewer had access to an audio player or a radio. Figure 4 shows the rates of access for the various technologies. Very few of those surveyed reported having access to the Internet; many were not aware of what it was.

Figure 4. Use of various technologies by school students, teachers and community adults.

FIGURE 4 About Here

Across all groups, a small proportion of respondents reported experience of using audio or video materials for learning in school lessons, in college or in training (students = 1.9%; teachers = 15.2%; adults = 4.2%). A larger proportion of respondents in all categories reported having used a computer for learning in school lessons, in college or in training (students = 16.3%; teachers = 12.8%; adults = 8.5%). Among those reporting use of audio or video materials or a computer for educational purposes, the frequency of use tended to be 'occasional' or 'not very often'. Few respondents (students = 8.0%; teachers = 13.4%; adults = 7.7%) reported using a computer for informal learning (that is, outside of lessons, college or

training). Where this had been done, it had only been ‘occasionally’ or ‘not very often’.

Only a small proportion of teachers reported using audio, video or computer-based materials for their teaching, either directly in lessons or to obtain support material or information. Table 6 shows the proportions that had done so.

Table 6. Teachers’ reported use of technologies for teaching

TABLE 6 About Here

In summary: In terms of technology infrastructure and provision, a significant digital divide exists between those residing in metropolitan/urban locations and the very substantial rural population. However, recent years have seen a dramatic rise in access to mobile phones and network coverage is extensive. Internet access and use was extremely low. Only a small proportion of those surveyed reported experience of formal or informal learning using audio, video or computer resources and few teachers reported using such resources to support their teaching.

5. Discussion: Towards a better understanding of the communicative environment

Taken in combination, the baseline studies have provided an abundance of data and evidence that has helped EIA to improve its understanding of the multiple factors that can influence communicative language acquisition and use in Bangladesh. The findings enable us to comprehend some of the interrelationships between various factors and the cumulative effects that emerge as potentially significant. Here are some examples of emerging themes that warrant further attention or investigation.

- Assessment requirements appear to determine the ‘hidden’ curriculum in schools, with teachers focusing on exam requirements. For English there is no formal testing of oral skills, so lessons concentrate instead on comprehension and grammar (which are examined)[Study 3]. Most workbooks and textbooks emphasise grammatical structures and often contain outdated exercises and vocabulary [Study 4]. Students recognise the mismatch between the skill they need most for success in school examinations (*writing*) and what they will require predominantly for life after school (*speaking*)[Study 2a]. Employers experience difficulties in recruiting applicants with appropriate communicative skills in English [Study 2b].
- The most prevalent pedagogical approach in English lessons is teacher-centred and didactic, despite the ostensible CLT approach of the national *English for Today* curriculum [Studies 3 & 4]. This provides little opportunity for communicative activities (involving pairs or small groups of students) through which speaking and listening can be rehearsed and developed by learners.
- There are few occasions when students can practice communicating in English in what is, to a very large extent, a monolingual country. Both in and out of school there are few possibilities for students to *actively* use English for communication [Studies 2a, 3 & 6b].
- Good role models for spoken English are scarce. The competence of many teachers in spoken English appears to be at a level lower than expected by the *English for Today* curriculum, so students do not have good examples to emulate [Study 1]. Non-textbook resources are rarely available for use in classes at any

level [Studies 3 & 4]. Those who provide instruction in English at teacher training colleges often lack sufficient proficiency in speaking [Study 5]. The mass media provide little exposure to spoken English and outside of the metropolitan areas there are few opportunities for Bangladeshis to encounter English being spoken [Study 6a]. Opportunities for the informal learning of communicative English are very limited [Studies 2a, 6a & 6b].

If communicative use of English is to be enhanced in Bangladesh, a holistic and multi-faceted approach is required to transform many aspects of the communicative environment. Multiple changes appear to be necessary in order to facilitate and enable the realisation of widely held aspirations within the population.

6. Limitations of the studies

Studies that required data collection in the field (Studies 1, 2, 3 and 6b) were limited to selected administrative/geographical parts of Bangladesh, so the findings cannot be considered representative of Bangladesh in its entirety. For access to schools, permission needed to be obtained from the relevant ministries, local government officials, NGOs and school heads. Within these constraints, efforts were made to ensure that the schools visited represented a broad range in terms of location and demographics. At individual schools, the research sample(s) of classes, teachers and students was determined locally within parameters provided by EIA.

Each of these studies involved data collection by a team: In all cases the field visits were preceded by briefing, training and standardisation sessions. To enhance inter-rater reliability, Studies 1 and 3 involved regular review meetings for team members

to discuss any problems encountered and to re-examine the protocols and tools. Bangladeshi project staff facilitated the conduct of Study 1 within schools, as the Trinity College assessors did not speak Bangla. All of these factors could impact upon the reliability of the findings. The reports of the Baseline Studies (English in Action, 2009a-2009h) provide further detail.

7. Conclusion

If you aim to bring about significant changes in educational outcomes and the associated processes for achieving them, you need a detailed and well-informed understanding of the complexities of the situation existing before any interventions commence. Baseline research conducted for the EIA project provides reliable evidence about salient features so that subsequent studies of the same (or very similar) factors can establish the extent of change that has occurred over time. The studies reported here have provided baseline data for future comparisons over the life of the project. In addition, they also informed the design and implementation of innovative materials, resources and strategies within primary and secondary schools. Innovation and change are essential if higher levels of communicative English competence are to be achieved in Bangladesh. Already there are some signs of improvements being achieved (e.g. English in Action, 2011; Shohel and Kirkwood, 2012).

Ultimately, these studies will provide the means by which the project can demonstrate that the communicative ability of people who learn English is improved. In other words, EIA will have increased significantly the number of

Bangladeshis able to communicate in English to levels that enable them to take up opportunities from which they may derive social and or economic benefit.

Acknowledgements

English in Action, Bangladesh (<http://www.eiabd.com/eia/>) involves collaboration between the Governments of the UK and of Bangladesh. Both the interventions described and the associated research, monitoring and evaluation activities are funded by the UK Department for International Development (DfID) through a consortium of partners that includes the UK Open University and BBC World Service Trust. I would like to acknowledge, with gratitude, the work many people – EIA staff, Project partners and teams from other organisations in Bangladesh and the UK – in planning, co-ordinating, facilitating or conducting the studies reported here. Dr. Jan Rae and this journal's anonymous reviewers provided very helpful comments on the manuscript. My particular thanks go to the hundreds of citizens of Bangladesh who participated in these studies.

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Table 1. The main beneficiaries of the English in Action Project, Bangladesh

Individual	School students, teachers (as learners), young adults, parents & guardians, media professionals, etc.
Practitioner	Teachers, media professionals, etc.
Organisational	School head teachers, School Management Committees, Upazila and District Education Officers, Universities & Teacher Training Colleges, NGOs, companies & enterprises, media organisations, etc.
National	Ministries for Primary and Secondary Education, National Curriculum Authority, National & Regional Examinations Boards, etc.
International	Diaspora communities, international agencies, etc.

Table 2. Composition and Trinity grades attained by the 4 groups of interviewees (primary and secondary school students, teachers and community adults)

Group Tested	Female (No.)	Male (No.)	All (No.)	Mean Trinity grade	Standard deviation
<i>Primary students – School class 1</i>	199	142	341	1.31	57.25
<i>Primary students – School class 2</i>	165	175	340	1.25	57.41
<i>Primary students – School class 3</i>	162	129	291	1.45	47.66
<i>Primary students – School class 4</i>	163	159	322	1.25	56.58
<i>Primary students – School class 5</i>	169	148	317	1.51	45.62
Primary students - Total	858	753	1,611	1.34	47.71
<i>Secondary students – School class 6</i>	258	222	480	1.76	68.76
<i>Secondary students – School class 7</i>	264	231	495	1.90	68.24
<i>Secondary students – School class 8</i>	262	231	493	2.19	66.07
<i>Secondary students – School class 9</i>	242	209	451	2.41	57.57
<i>Secondary students – School class 10</i>	161	129	290	2.72	30.31
Secondary students - Total	1,187	1,022	2,209	2.14	55.76
Teachers	154	300	454	3.52	31.47
Community adults	101	164	265	1.49	33.57
TOTALS	2,300	2,239	4,539		

Table 3. Extent of use of English reported for a range of communicative activities

Communicative activity	Proportion (%) that report using English for the listed communicative activity 'Not at all' or 'Very little'		
	Students	Teachers	Adults
Reading:			
Reading posters or billboards	53.6	12.3	36.6
Reading instructions or labels	59.2	17.0	38.3
Reading comics or cartoons	80.2	67.4	84.6
Reading magazine or newspaper articles	90.3	55.1	81.7
Reading stories	78.4	60.9	86.3
Using the Internet	98.9	97.2	98.1
Writing:			
Writing to penfriends	94.7	77.8	89.9
Writing letters	89.4	72.1	89.9
Writing e-mails	99.1	98.0	98.1
Helping relatives to write letters or e-mails	97.0	85.0	95.4
Helping relatives to complete forms	86.1	32.9	65.6
Texting, chatting or posting Internet messages	99.5	96.1	98.4
Writing stories or poems	87.6	85.9	92.4
Listening/watching:			
Listening to songs	74.9	70.9	84.3
Listening to stories	90.1	75.3	90.2
Listening to radio programmes	90.3	73.0	86.6
Watching TV programmes or films	75.6	48.8	67.0
Speaking:			
Telephoning friends or relatives overseas	91.2	70.8	87.2
Talking face-to-face with friends or relatives	68.6	45.4	75.1
Talking to foreigners	91.2	70.7	86.3

Table 4. Self-rating of strongest and weakest skills in English

Strongest skill =	Reading (%)	Writing (%)	Speaking (%)	Listening (%)	None of these (%)
Students	48.8	31.3	10.0	4.0	5.9
Teachers	34.5	32.5	23.0	8.4	1.6
Community Adults	29.6	24.3	13.8	12.2	20.1
Weakest skill =	Reading (%)	Writing (%)	Speaking (%)	Listening (%)	None of these (%)
Students	10.7	32.1	43.2	8.5	10.7
Teachers	1.8	22.0	51.1	12.0	1.8
Community Adults	8.2	23.1	51.6	9.3	8.2

N.B. Figures in bold indicate the highest frequency in each category.

Table 5. Skills in English considered necessary in organisations

Type of employer organisation	Reading (%)	Writing (%)	Speaking (%)	No. of cases
IT companies	35.7	28.6	78.6	14
Banks	25.8	41.9	83.9	31
Tourism	-	25.0	100.0	20
Hotels / Restaurants	-	10.5	100.0	19
Garment Manufacturing	10.7	35.7	89.3	28
Export Agents / Industries	50.0	16.7	66.7	6
Colleges / Universities	12.5	12.5	100.0	8
NGOs	33.3	22.2	88.9	9
Other Industries	50.0	25.0	75.0	8

Table 6. Teachers 'reported use of technologies for teaching

Technology use for teaching	%
Have used audio or video materials in lessons	8.0
Have used audio or video to get information or material to support teaching	10.7
Have used computer-based materials in lessons	8.7
Have used a computer to get information or material to support teaching	6.5

Figure 1. Spoken English proficiency - The overall distribution of Trinity grades achieved by the 4 groups of interviewees.

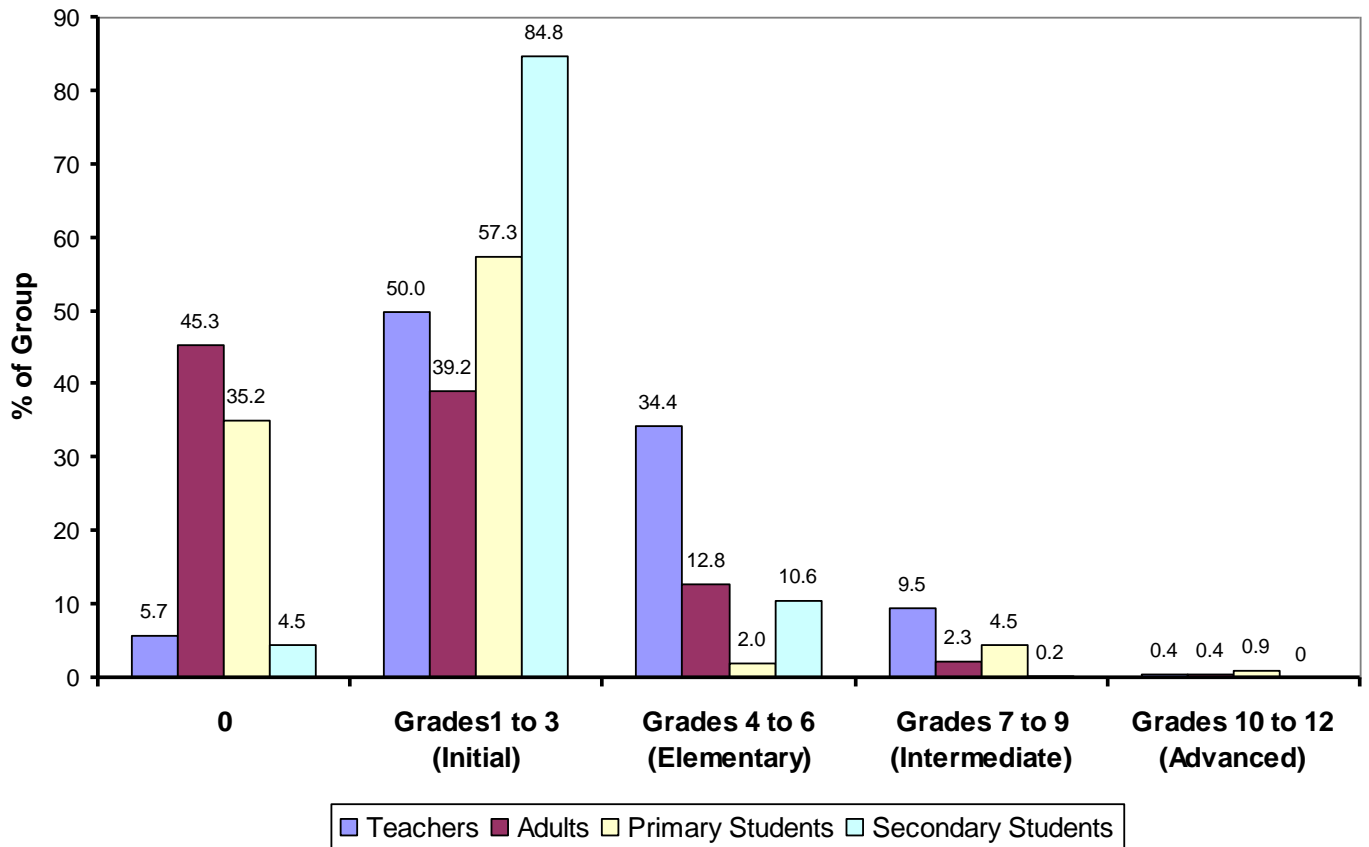


Figure 2. The distribution of teachers across the full range of Trinity grades

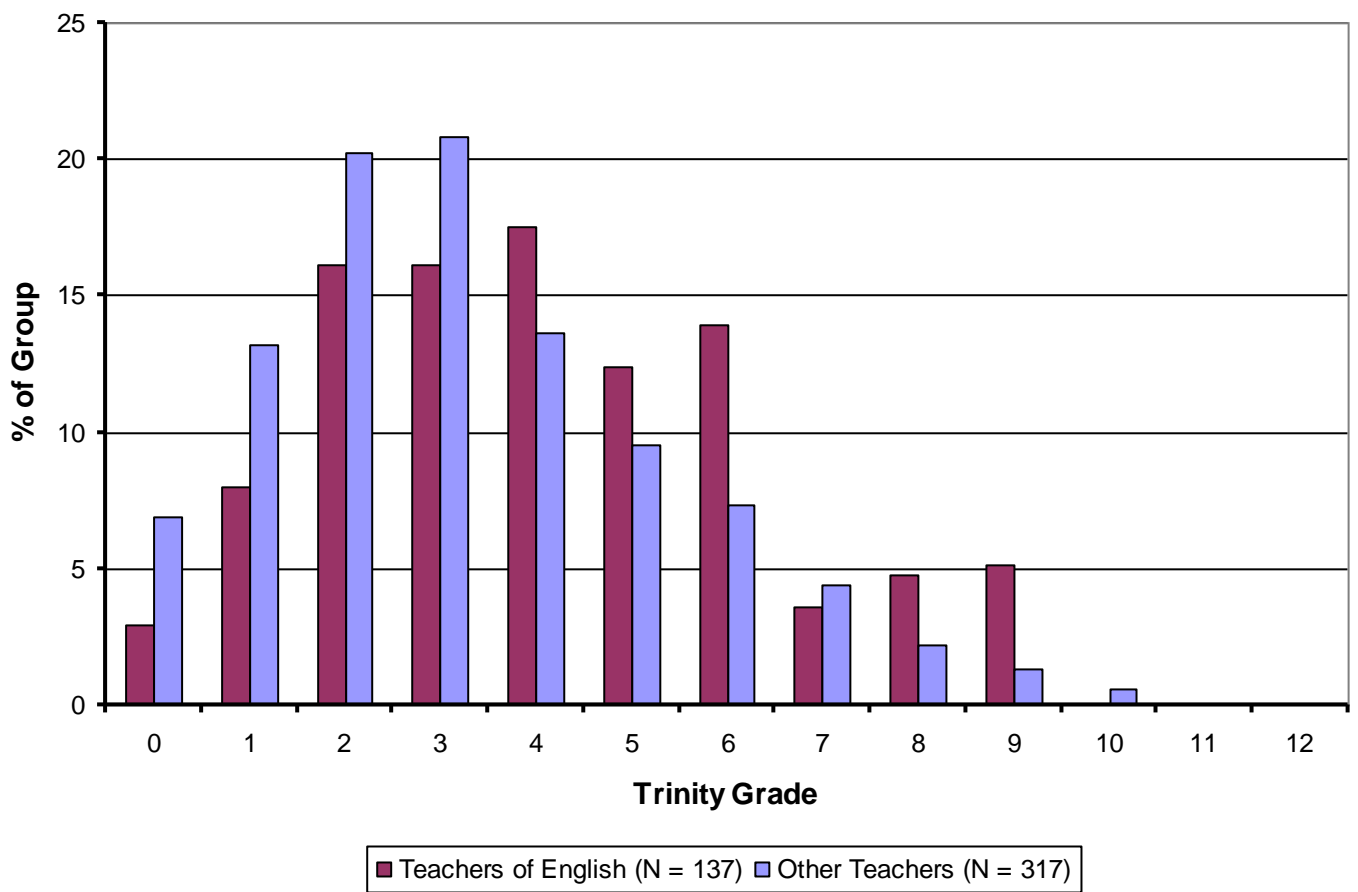


Figure 3. Comparison of mobile phone subscribers and Internet users, 2000-2007

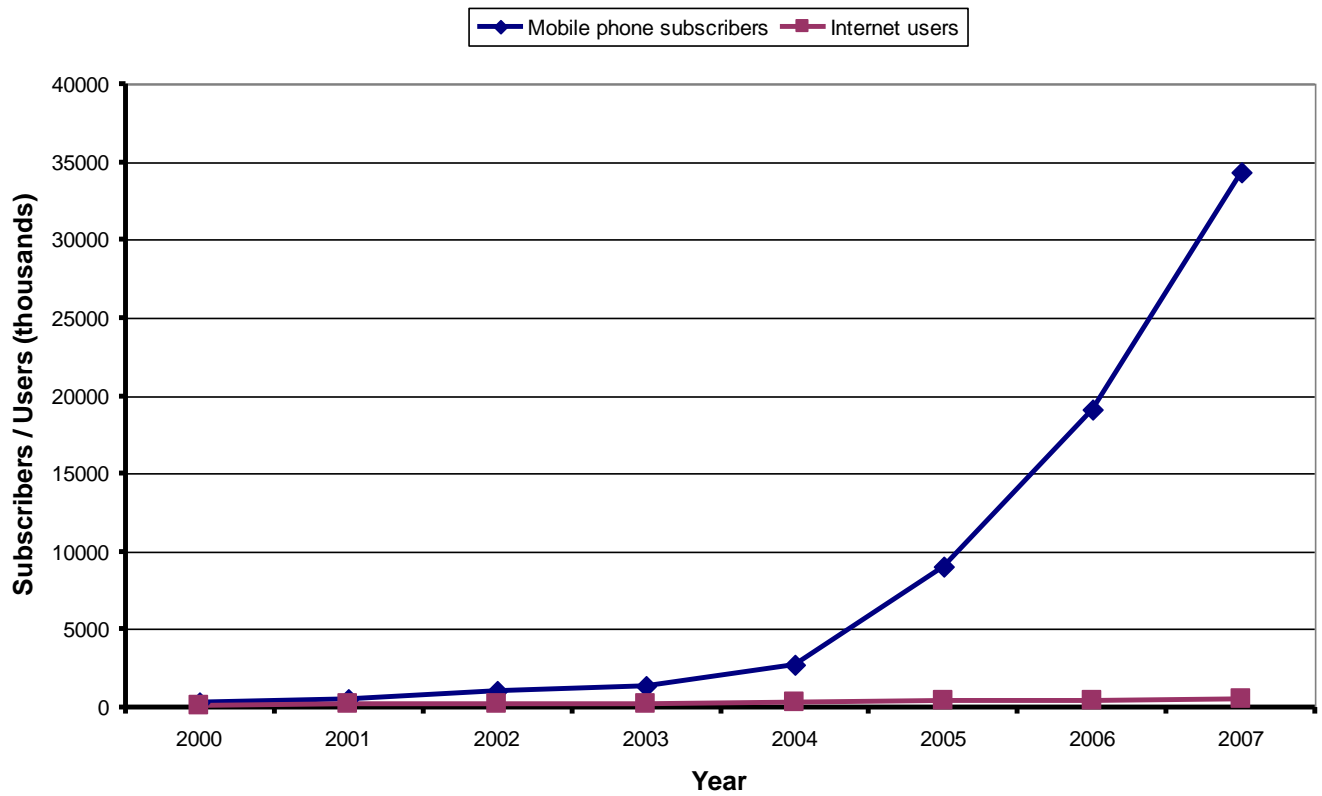


Figure 4. Use of various technologies by school students, teachers and community adults.

